Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

The prairie chicken was dead, but I had to touch it, smoothing barred feathers with the same gentle motion the hunter stroked the space between his gun dog's ears. Nice things were said about both the bird and the dog to keep an uncomfortable silence from creeping in between strangers.

There was nothing heroic about the shot or the retrieve, the hunter said. The grouse flushed, he fired, the bird fell … it all happened so quickly. Still, the event was significant and the hunter understood it. Comments were made concerning the importance of being one of the first to hunt a bird his ancestors once pursued.

The bird was shot last fall in Grand Forks County on opening day of the state's first prairie chicken season in nearly 60 years. Here, and in southeastern North Dakota, 51 prairie chickens were hustled out of prairie grass during a nine-day season. Hunters this fall will again get a chance to do the same.

All the birds I saw that opening day in 2004 were dead, taken by hunters who joked about walking a bunch of miles – and firing about as many shots – to get their birds. Without getting novel, and nothing else to go on, really, the hunters fell on experience and hunted the prairie chickens as if they were sharp-tailed grouse. Behind a dog without bias to game bird lineage, the hunters kicked around cover the native grouse often prefer depending on time of day and weather.

It worked. A couple limits of prairie chickens spread out across the tailgate of a pickup – that day's version of a flashing light to direct novices cruising gravel roads for a first glimpse of the celebrated birds – was proof.

Prairie chickens are one of those species we tend to celebrate more than others, rightfully so or not, because of their story. Like bighorn sheep in the badlands, it's one of comeback. Twenty years ago, the birds in Grand Forks County had vanished, while a population hung on in the Sheyenne National Grasslands to the south.

Prairie chickens in Grand Forks County are a good example of what happens when you provide the right kinds of habitat, and get some lucky bounces from the weather, predators and other influences. The birds responded, slowly grew in numbers, and today there's a huntable population.

My part in the 2004 season was one of spectator. I was there to document the first hunt in years with a camera and pen. I didn't need live birds to tell the story. I let the hunters and Game and Fish Department biologists do that. Even so, there was a desire to see prairie chickens on the wing; birds trading back and forth between feeding and loafing areas. I wanted to see how the birds looked in the air, curious whether they flew with the same irregular wing beats favored by sharptails.

Without really thinking about it, I was scouting. I had the postcards for my son and I filled out in my head for the 2005 prairie chicken drawing. I mentally marked spots where birds dropped into cover, quizzed hunters about the kinds of habitat birds flushed from and queried biologists about any prairie chicken quirks that may give the hunter an edge.

Unfortunately, there may come a day when all of this becomes routine, like hunting sharptails, Hungarian partridge or ring-necked pheasants without giving much, if any thought to the birds' stories. Where they come from (distant lands in the case of Huns and pheasants) or how they've survived for eons (as is the case with sharp-tailed grouse) on the sometimes inhospitable Northern Plains.

Prairie chickens today remain a novelty because we've hunted them just once in six decades. We turn dead birds over in our hands, smoothing rouge feathers with the resilience of a cowlick, as we decide whether to stuff the animal for display or cook it over coals.

The same attention, let's not forget, should be paid to those animals we hunt as custom, whose appeal is sometimes regrettably measured only in daily bag limits.

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